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MYTH AND TRUTH

An Essay on the Language of Faith

By

JOHN KNOX

THE UNIVERSITY PRESS OF VIRGINIA

Charlottesville

RICHARD LECTURES FOR 1963-64
University of Virginia

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THE UNIVERSITY PRESS OF VIRGINIA

First published 1964
Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number: 64-25858

FOREWORD

THIS small book comprises the lectures it was my privilege to give at the University of Virginia in the autumn of 1963 on the James L. Richard Foundation. The lectures were addressed to an audience consisting largely of university students and were prepared with such hearers in mind. No attempt has been made to revise the lectures radically, whether in form or substance; and they are here presented very much as they were originally delivered.

To Professor Lewis M. Hammond, chairman of the Richard Lecture Committee, and his colleagues I wish to express my appreciation of the honor of the invitation to give the lectures and of the many courtesies they showed me during my visit.

Thanks are given to two friends and academic associates, Dr. Olive Brose and Dr. Robert L. Horn, who were good enough to read my manuscript at an early stage in its development and to give me criticisms and suggestions which

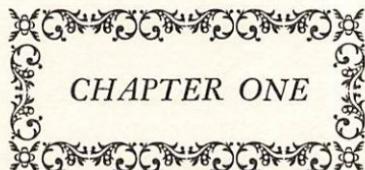
have been most useful. I am also grateful for the expert help of Miss Ann Belford, my research assistant at Union Theological Seminary in 1963-64.

JOHN KNOX

April 1964

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CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM OF FAITH AND TRUTH

WHAT are we to make of—and do with—the mythology which is so deeply embedded in the religious culture to which we belong? This is the very practical question with which we shall be concerned in this series of discussions. It probably does not need to be said that the religious culture I shall have principally in mind is the Christian culture which alone I know with any degree of intimacy. But the problems with which we shall be dealing are not essentially different for the Jew; and I shall hope that what I shall say will, in principle, seem relevant to Jew and Christian alike. To repeat, then, we shall be asking how we are to understand and deal with the mythological character of the religion we know.

To some of us—perhaps, in some measure, to all of us—it

may be shocking to hear Christianity, or Judaism, referred to as having a mythology at all. We have grown up associating myths exclusively with other religions, especially with the ancient pagan cults. Far from thinking of Christianity as being also in any sense or degree mythological, we have seen in its nonmythological character one of its principal distinctions and a decisive mark of its unique value and truth. Actually, however, even a little reflection will convince us that this distinction cannot be maintained. The biblical accounts of how God made the world and of how he will bring it to an end and other stories of his mighty acts cannot be separated, as regards the formal type or category to which they belong, from narratives on similar themes in Homer, in Virgil, or in Norse or German legend. If superiority in value or truth is to be found in the biblical stories, it will consist, not in the absence of the mythological, but in the particular character of the biblical mythology, and, more basically, in the superior value and truth of what is being expressed and conveyed through it. With these matters of value and truth we shall be concerned before this series of discussions has ended, but just now we are simply acknowledging the fact itself.

It will be obvious that in speaking thus I am presupposing a certain understanding of the word "myth." A recent writer speaks of myth as being "simply a numinous story";¹

¹ Alan W. Watts, *Myth and Ritual in Christianity* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1953), p. 58. In a later publication (*The Two Hands of God* [New York: George Braziller, 1963], p. 2) Watts withdraws in effect the limiting word "story," indicating that "myth" must be thought of as including, not only narratives, but other expressions of the numinous as well. Neither now nor later shall I be attempting a formal definition of myth; but in this discussion a "myth" will always be a "story." It seems to

and Rudolf Bultmann, to whose important work on our theme we shall find ourselves referring later in this discussion, defines the word as "the use of imagery to express the otherworldly in terms of this world and the divine in terms of human life, the other side in terms of this side."² If the word is understood in some such way, it is obviously applicable to much in Bible and Creed; and it is in such a sense that I am using it—a human story of a divine action. But quite different understandings are possible. Sometimes the words "myth" and "mythology" are used in such close connection with primitive religion that their sense is entirely determined by this association. Archaic man's conceptions of nature and of God's immanence within it, his way of regarding time as cyclic rather than linear, and other characteristics of his mentality are made integral to the meaning of the words.³ If it should be decided that they must be defined in this way, one would no longer be able to use them of the

me better to use another word—say, a broader term like "symbol"—for other numinous words or objects.

² "The New Testament and Mythology," in H. W. Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth*, tr. R. H. Fuller (London: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1954), p. 10.

³ This tends to be the case among historians of religion and anthropologists. If the essential meaning of the word "myth" is thought of strictly and exclusively in this way, one must either deny its applicability to the Hebrew-Christian materials or apply it in a very partial or "broken" sense. On this matter of whether the terms "myth" and "mythological" can appropriately be used of the biblical "stories," and in what sense, see M. Eliade, *Le mythe de l'éternal retour: Archétypes et répétition* (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1949); English translation by Willard R. Trask, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), esp. pp. 95–162; and H. and H. A. Frankfort, *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), esp. pp. 3–26 and 363–73. See also Joseph Campbell, *The*

biblical and credal materials with which we are concerned. But in that event we should need to find another word for the numinous stories we actually find in our tradition. Later I shall give some indications of the kind of numinous story I believe a biblical myth to be. Just now I am using the term in the broadest, most general, sense and am making the point that in this sense Judaism and Christianity, as certainly as other religions, have their myths and their mythologies.

We shall be the more ready to make this acknowledgment when we recognize, as on reflection we must, the necessity or inevitability of mythology. Religion could not exist without it. Theology is essentially—one may say, by definition—mythological, and this is as surely true of Christian theology as of any other. For the distinctively Christian message, the “gospel,” is an announcement of something God has done—namely, of what he did in Christ—and distinctively Christian theology is concerned with explicating and communicating the concrete content, the realized inner meaning, of this divine act. It is an account of an action of God, and this is precisely what we are calling a myth. To be sure, the term suggests, not a plain, factual account, but rather a story or a picture—which means that the account is imaginative and therefore, to a degree at least, imaginary. But it is important

Masks of God (New York: Viking Press, 1962), esp. the first several pages of the book.

The problem of how “myth” should be defined is a most difficult and complicated one, and, generally speaking, writers such as those I have just cited make no attempt at a comprehensive definition. See the opening pages of Watts, *The Two Hands of God*, already cited, and M. Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 5–6. “Is it even possible,” Eliade asks, “to find *one* definition that will cover all the types and functions of myths in all traditional and archaic societies?”

to see that there cannot be such a thing as a plain, factual account of a divine act, whether among pagans, Jews, or Christians. One might conceivably make a purely logical or metaphysical definition of the word "God" or one might affirm the bare fact of God's reality without the use of any imaginary story or picture; but one could not go beyond such abstract statements and try to say something about any action of God, or about God's relation to the world, or about his concrete meaning for us without resort to mythological speech—that is, without employing images from our human experience which, by definition, cannot strictly or literally apply. We find ourselves speaking of God as "coming" or "going" or "sending" or "forming" or "building" or "battling" or "raising" or "casting down" or "ransoming" or "begetting," according as the nature of the particular story or picture requires or makes appropriate.

In a word, we find ourselves dramatizing or mythologizing. Use either of these terms you wish or find some other; but however you want to say it, the main point is clear and undeniable: we are no longer speaking factually or literally. We cannot speak so when we are speaking of God, for our speech can use only the terms provided by our human experience and thought, and God transcends both. The divine, however near to, even pervasive of, the human it may be, is still essentially transhuman or superhuman. To identify God with the world or with men is to deny his reality as God. To equate the divine with the human—even with the human in its deepest dimension—is to deny the distinctive existence of the divine. God's thoughts are not our thoughts and his ways are not our ways. This is not merely a fact about God; it belongs to his very nature as God that this should be true. The

word "God" is emptied of all meaning unless this transcendence is affirmed. If, therefore, we would speak of God's being and nature, we must make use of analogy, interpreting him in categories which arise out of our reflection upon our own life; and if we would speak of any "action" of God, we shall perforce speak mythologically, God becoming, so to speak, a character in a story or drama, the terms of which are supplied by our experience with men and things.

This being the fact, how is the Christian to respond to it? What bearing does the recognition of it have upon his life as a Christian, and how is he to deal with it? It is with questions of this kind that these lectures are concerned. I shall make no effort at a comprehensive or systematic discussion of mythology, nor shall I be dealing with the subject as a psychoanalyst might, or an anthropologist, or a sociologist, or, for that matter, a historian of culture in the general sense. Even with regard to the biblical mythology, with which alone we shall be seriously engaged, I shall make no attempt to trace its cultural roots or to determine its relations with other ancient mythologies. In a word, I shall speak, not as the scientific historian of religion—although I shall often be dependent on his work and hope that I shall not in any way violate his findings—but as a Christian teacher concerned about the bearings of some of these findings on the life and thought of the Church. I repeat, then, the practical question with which we began: What is the Christian to make of the fact that many of his credal affirmations, many of his theological beliefs, are (in the broad, rather loose sense in which I have thus far used the term) mythological in character? Is he to regard it as an embarrassing fact which he must grudgingly concede? Is it a fact which, as he must see it, can have only

the effect of confirming the denials of the atheist or the doubts of the skeptic and of making religious faith more difficult? Or, on the contrary, is it to be seen as a liberating fact, a means of both releasing and enriching religious faith, and therefore to be eagerly welcomed and warmly embraced? I am sure we ought to regard it in the latter way, and I shall be greatly disappointed if, in the course of these discussions, we are not led to think of it so, if we do not already. First, however, we need to say something of a more general kind about the relation of faith to truth. In doing so we shall not be speaking specifically about myths and mythology, but we shall be laying a foundation for our whole discussion.

When I referred a moment ago to the possibility that the Christian may feel an aversion to recognizing that his religion has anything to do with mythology, or mythology with his religion, I know that I said nothing strange or surprising. We should expect him to react in this way, and perhaps we feel something of the same aversion ourselves. This is partly owing to a misunderstanding of the nature of mythology, and this we shall try to deal with later. But it is not unlikely in any given instance that the hostility or apprehension we feel over this particular matter may have a broader base in a more or less habitual attitude of mind toward man's scientific and philosophical work and to the facts and truths which it has brought, or may bring, to light. We shall not go into the historical or other reasons for it, but can we deny the fact that Christians have often found themselves taking this negative, or at any rate distrustful, attitude? Insofar as this has been the case, the Church in its relation to the intel-

lectual enterprise of mankind has been constantly on the defensive—and, one must add, on the run—feeble resisting at first what in the end it has been forced abjectly to yield to. This began to be true certainly as early as Copernicus, and you and I have witnessed the same process at work in our own time.

It is hardly necessary to refer to the tragic effects of this negative attitude or stance on both the Church itself and the larger society. For the Church it has meant not only a measure of alienation from the intellectual community but also a stifling of its own intellectual life. Its efforts to understand itself and its distinctive task in the world have been arbitrarily limited. An intolerable and paralyzing tension has been set up between the religious and the intellectual spheres within the minds of generations of Christians, upon whom has been laid an obligation to believe what their minds have found incredible. As for society as a whole, this same divisive and alienating process has undoubtedly contributed to that drying up of the deepest springs of our cultural life which we call “secularization” and which, like a kind of dry rot, threatens to destroy both our society and our souls. For man cannot indefinitely live on the surface of things; he must feel firmness in the depths below him. It would be a gross oversimplification to attribute the modern trend toward secularization to any one factor. But surely one important cause has been the Church’s inability to respond positively and creatively to many of the facts which man’s scientific and philosophical inquiry has established as unquestionably true.

This situation is utterly anomalous and quite unwarranted. It does not need to be. Indeed, an egregious denial of

the essential nature of religious faith is involved in it. How incredible that we should be under obligation to believe the incredible! How impossible that we should be asked to credit the impossible, or to reject by an act of will what our minds find it necessary to accept! And how monstrous the conception of a God who would impose such a demand! If anyone is to be anti-intellectual, we shall not expect it to be one who ascribes our minds, along with whatever else belongs to our essential nature as men, to an ultimate divine Goodness. If anyone might be expected to welcome every newly discovered fact about the world and about human life, it would be one who trusts, adores, and rejoices in the Creator of all things. If anyone is in position never to fear truth, it would seem to be the one who loves God—who, however else He is thought of, must be the ultimate Source and Norm of truth. And yet, although the Church has always known this in its heart, it has over and over again fallen into the trap of identifying religious faith with the acceptance of certain facts and propositions and the rejection of others, and has thus gratuitously placed itself at the mercy, so to speak, of scientific or philosophical inquiry, wistfully hoping that its own precious facts and propositions will be vindicated but deeply fearful that they will not be—and often with good reason.

The truth is that religious faith is not a matter of accepting or rejecting facts with which the scientist is concerned or of believing or denying propositions with which the philosopher is dealing. Religious faith is an awareness of the depths in our existence and a certain kind of response to what reveals itself in them. These depths are there—are there, not only for confessing Jews or Christians or Muslims

or Hindus, but for every man. Because one may feel them as emptiness or nothingness, one may seek to escape the reality of them by occupying oneself with various superficial concerns. But such efforts at diversion must finally fail and can never, even for a moment, be fully successful. A. N. Whitehead has written that religious experience begins with "God the Void";⁴ we all know him so even if we never come to know him in any other way. It is possible to come to know him also as Love; but when we thus confess him, we are not stating either a fact which our scientific research has discovered (or might conceivably disprove) or a proposition which logical or philosophical analysis has established (or might conceivably refute). Rather, we are simply describing the way we have come to feel the depths within and beneath our existence, the way they have disclosed themselves to us.⁵

Nor is faith an alternative or competing route to such facts or propositions. Faith is not a way of learning facts or of arriving at sound formulations of the structures of being or thought. Faith is not a kind of short cut to truth, a bypassing of intellectual effort. It is often thought of so. We

⁴ *Religion in the Making* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1926), p. 16.

⁵ I say "within and beneath" because transcendence (in some direction, so to speak) needs to be affirmed of God. This is a point which is not made quite clear, I think, in certain parts of J. A. T. Robinson's book, *Honest to God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), a book with whose intention, as I understand it, I am in sympathy. Many of us have been greatly helped by Paul Tillich's emphasis upon the dimension of depth, and my indebtedness to him in what I am now writing will be apparent. It will not do, however, to identify God with the "depths" in man, although it may be recognized that God meets or finds us there. It is *out of* the depths that we cry to God (Ps. 130:1). This is true even if God is apprehended as "deeper" still, a Depth beneath our own.

suppose, for example, that faith gives us answers to historical questions. (We cannot establish by historical evidence this or that occurrence; but, we say, we accept it on faith.) Or we suppose that faith can furnish us with final and indubitably true propositions about God and his ways with men, even though our own minds find the propositions unintelligible or incredible. (This or that proposition makes no sense to us; but we believe it, as we say, by faith.) Now in both of these cases we are using a good word "faith" to cover our lack of seriousness about what is true, just as we often use the good word "grace" to cover our lack of seriousness about what is just. Faith gives us no answers to questions either about historical or other scientific facts or about philosophical or theological concepts. Unless the application of our own minds, our intelligence and imagination, to the actual materials furnished us in our experience, including our experience as religious persons, brings us the answers to such questions, we simply do not have them.

The truth of the matter is that faith gives us no answers to *any* questions. It is our answer to God; it is not God's answer to our questions. It is our recognition of and response to the ultimate divine reality which has disclosed itself within our experience. Faith, then, is a kind of knowledge—and indeed the surest kind of knowledge there is, the knowledge of concrete reality, the knowledge that consists in immediate awareness. Sometimes faith has been thought of as a venture, a betting on what is recognized to be only a possibility, a risking of one's life on the hypothesis of God's reality. I used to speak in this way sometimes but can no longer find this kind of language quite true. This is not because I am less often assailed by doubt or tempted to despair, but rather

because I would no longer define such moments of uncertainty and inner struggle as moments of faith. For faith is the experience of being grasped by God's indubitable reality, the actual knowing of him by whom we are fully known, the actual resting in him who made us for himself.

And the facts and concepts of various kinds? I no more learn them in the moment of faith than, in the moment when my friend opens his heart to me, I learn where he was born, or who his parents were, or acquire a sound theory about the structure of personality. With facts and concepts revelation does not provide me—whether it be the revelation of my friend or the revelation of God. In the moment of revelation we are confronted by One of whom we do not dare ask any questions but who has his own question to ask, "Lovest thou me?" Faith is not believing what we have good reason for knowing is not true (as though we really could!); it is not *believing* something at all, whether a fact or a proposition. It is not getting answers to our questions; it is making answer to God's question: "Yea, Lord, thou knowest that I love thee."

Such faith casts out all fear except the fear of God—which is only another way of speaking of our response to the ultimate truth and its claim on us. For what is the "fear of God" but awe before that which infinitely transcends us both in value and in depth and fullness of being, solemn wonder that this Transcendence should speak and be present in our own hearts, and dread lest, by living as though life were a small and tawdry thing, we betray both God and our real selves? Nothing else, or not otherwise, shall we fear. Least of all shall we fear truth, truth of whatever kind or order.

In one of the prayers of Milner-White we are led to ask that God shall give us "such trust" in truth that we shall "ask no rest from its demands and have no fear in its service."⁶ But the strange fact is that some of us find ourselves fearing truth because we love the very God to whom we address such a prayer, while others of us feel forced to deny God because we love the very truth he bids us trust. Some reject truth without knowing they are rejecting God. Others love truth without knowing it is God they love. On neither side is the passionate concern for truth recognized as the essentially religious thing it is. The Church must bear some part of the blame that this is so.

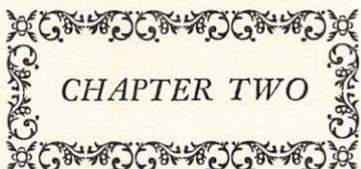
I have just said "some *part* of the blame"; for responsibility for the tragic conflict between science and faith does not rest on the Church alone. It would not do to identify the difference between the two as the difference between love of truth, on the one side, and distrust of truth, on the other. Actually, religion has been as devoted to truth as science—has always professed to be and, at its best, has always been. The trouble is that the "truth" which it has sought and prized has been a different "truth" from that which science has sought and prized; and neither religion nor science has fully come to terms with the "truth" of the other. Neither, in other words, has found a way fully to recognize the richness and manifoldness of truth.

As a matter of fact, in this respect science is likely to be more ignorant and naïve than religion. The fact that its

⁶ Eric Milner-White, *A Cambridge Bede Book* (New York: Longmans Green and Company, 1936).

wants to affirm and indeed cannot help affirming? How can one hear what are sometimes called, not too exactly, the truth of the mind and the truth of the heart and find them both one?

It is a major thesis of these chapters that this can happen only as we recognize that each speaks a different language; and that though each language can be understood, neither can be exhaustively translated into the other. In particular, we shall be thinking about the importance of myth, not only in the communication of faith, but also in our original apprehension of its meaning and truth.



CHAPTER TWO

IMAGES AND MYTHS

WE BEGAN this discussion by observing the mythological character of much in our confession as Christians and by noting the difficulty we are likely to feel in recognizing and acknowledging this fact. It was suggested that the basis of this inner resistance might be a very broad one—namely, an anomalous and altogether gratuitous suspicion that the concerns of faith and the concerns of truth are sometimes adverse to each other—and both the enormity and the tragic consequences of this illusion were exposed. It was indicated, however, that our objection might also be explained by a misunderstanding of what mythology is. It is with this misunderstanding—as well as with the true nature of the thing being misunderstood—that we shall now be concerned.

Undoubtedly the principal reason for our disposition to reject the idea of any association of mythology with our re-

ligious faith is our common presupposition that a myth is by definition untrue. The word suggests, perhaps most prominently, the fanciful and the fictitious; and in our ordinary speech when we speak of something as "mythical" we mean simply that it is nonexistent. Although it is not difficult to see how this has come to be the popular meaning of the term, its basic significance is, needless to say, quite different. The term really designates a kind of speech, a category of discourse, and is neutral as regards the question of truth. A myth can be false or true. One's judgment on this point, in the case of any particular myth, will be determined by the way one finds it meeting the criteria of truth which are appropriate to its category.

For just as speech is of many kinds, so the tests of truth are various. What is true, for example, in a historical drama will often not be true in a historical textbook. When Shaw in his *Saint Joan*¹ records a conversation in which a bishop of the Church and a feudal nobleman reflect on the significance of the emergence of nationalism and Protestantism in Europe, is the playwright telling the truth or not? Probably most of us reading or watching the play would say that he is. And yet we would know all the time that there is not the slightest reason to suppose that this conversation ever took place or even that these two particular individuals ever existed. But Shaw, we would say, is writing drama; and as drama this is true.

If we are making factual statements as, for example, about the speed of light or the date of an event, there is a definite set of criteria which our statements must fulfill. This is just as true when we make a logical or a mathematical statement

¹ Scene 4.

like, "The whole is greater than any of its parts"; but the criteria are not the same in this case as in the other. The two statements are in some ways incomparable; they belong to separate worlds of discourse, and the word "truth" has a somewhat different meaning in each. In the one kind of case, the statement is "true" if it corresponds with certain actual spatial or temporal conditions; in the other, if it possesses a certain inner consistency or coherence.

Now both of these kinds of speech are concerned with what are really abstractions—with bare facts or with concepts and their relations—and both can be carried on, or are supposed to be carried on, in precise, definable terms, terms which say exactly what is being thought. But most of our statements are of yet another kind. They deal with concretes. They have to do with what is immediately given in our actual experience, sensual, moral, and emotional. And if we go beyond the mere fact of the existence of such things and attempt to convey anything of their quality, their actual substance, their concrete reality—if we attempt this, we must perforce speak in terms largely drawn from our ways of sensing or feeling them. When we say, "The water is hot," we mean in most contexts or on most occasions, not that its temperature is above a certain fixed degree Fahrenheit, but that it "burns" our hands. So we may speak of the "refreshing" shade or of a "bracing" wind.

Such speech often, perhaps almost always, involves a transferring of terms from the area where they most properly belong to other areas; and we find ourselves employing metaphor or simile. The cold may be "bitter." Words of love may be "sweet." The coming of a friend may "warm" our hearts. It is clear that such terms do not apply to their

objects in the same precise or matter-of-fact way as do the terms in the other cases. But who will say that they may not be, in their own equally legitimate way, quite as true? It was George Buttrick who told me of the man who observed that an error had obviously crept into the text of Shakespeare's lines about there being "books in the running brooks, sermons in stones."² Quite clearly, the man said, the lines were meant to read: "sermons in books, stones in running brooks." As between the two phrases, "sermons in books" and "sermons in stones," there can be no question which is the more interesting; but can it be said that either is more *true*? The simple and obvious fact is that each is true in its own very different but altogether appropriate way, and we become absurd when we apply to one category of statement the criteria of truth which we quite properly apply to the other.

Now it would be a mistake to suppose that in the case of the one kind of statement—the literal, factual kind—we mean to say something about objective reality, and our statement is "really" true because it corresponds with this reality, whereas in the more poetic kind of statement we are simply trying to express a subjective attitude or experience and the statement can be called true only in the sense that it succeeds in doing so. There is no doubt that the words "true" and "truth" are often, and quite properly, employed in this almost entirely subjective way. We speak of a "true" feeling, meaning a sincere feeling; and a form of words which expresses the feeling will also be "true." A work of art can be called "true" when it effectively embodies a real vision or mood of the artist, though its correspondence with any objective reality is remote indeed. Even in such a case, how-

² *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene 1.

ever, it would be rash to deny any kind of objective reference. When one calls such a work "true," does one not imply, at the very least, that the vision or mood is to some extent or at certain moments shared by others besides the artist and is therefore not entirely subjective? And does one not also probably imply that there is something in the real situation of man in the world which gives rise to, or answers to, the artist's feeling? If, hearing Horatio in *Hamlet* say,

But, look, the morn, in russet mantle clad,
Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill,³

we find his words "true," we mean that we too have seen the dawn thus "walk" and that, moreover, it does in fact thus "walk." Such a statement could not be called "true" if some such objective reference were not found in it.

In other words, when we say there are "books in the running brooks," we are making a statement which, if we regard it as true at all, is for us objectively true—quite as much so as the statement that stones are there. We mean that "running brooks" have something to teach us—that they *really* do. So also if one reads a scene in a play and thinks of it as true, one means that such and such people in such and such a situation would really act, or at least might be expected to act, in just this way. If the scene happens to be a representation of some actual event or development, it may have objective truth of a more specific kind and indeed is not as fully true as it might be if it does not. I referred earlier to a scene in Shaw's *Saint Joan* involving a bishop and a nobleman. That scene could be called true if it is psychologically true—that is, if, given the situation which has developed in

³ Act I, Scene 1.

the play, the churchman and the feudal lord, as their characters have emerged, might plausibly have spoken to each other in the indicated way. But would we regard the scene as being fully true if it were not seen as being also historically true? And by applying that phrase one will mean, not that the scene actually took place, but—something equally objective—that what has proved to be the real significance of the events surrounding the career of Joan of Arc is set forth in the dramatist's quite imaginary picture.

Images, then (we are saying generally), can be true—that is, they can express actual qualities of actual things as known in experience or as carried in memory. Their truth can be as “objective” as that of mathematical or logical statements or of statements of scientific fact. All statements of the latter kind are concerned with abstractions—with the quantities or the quantitative relations of things—but objects in their concrete reality have *qualities*, and these qualities can be expressed and communicated only through images. B. H. Streeter illuminates the point by putting side by side a map of Venice and one of Turner’s paintings of that city.⁴ Who would dream of denying that the painting can be just as certainly true—objectively true—as even the most accurate map?

One difference as regards the truth of the two kinds of representation is at once apparent and will be seen as particularly important and relevant when we turn, in a moment, from images in general to myths in particular. There can be only one “true” map of Venice, but there may be many “true” paintings. The measurable dimensions and relations of an object can be truly stated in only one way; but its qual-

⁴ *Reality* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1926), pp. 31ff.

ity—its reality as felt or experienced—not only is this inexhaustible, having innumerable faces or aspects, but we recognize also that even a single aspect can be variously, but still quite truly, expressed. The “morn” does not always present itself in “russet” hue; and even when it does, Shakespeare’s line is not the only way it can be truly spoken of. Shakespeare himself has used other images, equally appropriate and true; and many other metaphors in many other poets may come to mind. However apt, or apparently perfect, a metaphor may be, it is always conceivable that an even apter one, or at least another just as apt, could be found. So there may be a dozen very different, but equally true, portraits of the same person. And to say that Shaw’s *Joan* is true does not mean saying that another dramatist’s very different play on the same theme may not also be true. In other words, while we shall always need figures or pictures of some kind if we would express the concrete reality of something in our experience, we are not limited to any one figure or picture. Although the use of images is unavoidable, no particular image is indispensable. We are always aware of the distinction between the reality known in our experience and our ways of speaking about it, and we are thus in no danger of mistaking the figurative or allusive character of our speech.

It is precisely this distinction which in mythology is obscured or drops from sight. And here is to be seen, perhaps, the most significant mark of the myth as compared with what we ordinarily call “figures of speech.” The myth claims a kind of relation to objective, factual truth which other forms of allusive discourse do not claim. We become aware of this difference when we observe the tendency

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the myth to be exclusive or definitive. We have just noted how there can be a quite indefinite proliferation of metaphors or similes in reference to the same object. This limitation is partly a fact that, whereas similes and metaphors, no art like plays or paintings, are the creation of myths. These folk creations. The true myths are invented; it is a cultural inheritance that have been so long and intimate a part of the life of a particular religion that they are kind of indispensable spiritual carriers of its vitality. We may reinterpret such a conception as conceivable substance.

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taken from one of the most brilliant of these, Mircea Eliade, who argues eloquently, and with great learning, that for primitive man what was actual in time and place had reality only because it participated, through repetition or imitation, in certain original acts of gods or divine heroes. Thus each New Year was a fresh creation of the world, and the same primordial creative deed was seen as reenacted in such events as conception and birth and in ceremonial cleansings and renewals. Eliade's principal point is that archaic man in this way "annuls time"; he is able to live "in a continual present" and thus escape from the latter point we shall need to return later when we discuss, with special reference to the Hebrew Christian tradition, the relation of myth to history. At this moment I am interested only in saying that this stretching, the "paradigmatic" nature of the god's actions as to the myths, far from requiring a devaluation of their truth, rather enhances it. For according to this view, the repetitive events which make up the Christian tradition were the myths true; they alone were reality at all only because they experience have reality of the original events. To be sure, these original events may have been taking place, not in our time, but in a "mythical time"; but, even so, they did exist. This objective truth of myths is emphasized by Eliade in his *History of Religious Ideas*, tr. Willard R.

ity—its reality as felt or experienced—not only is this inexhaustible, having innumerable faces or aspects, but we recognize also that even a single aspect can be variously, but still quite truly, expressed. The “morn” does not always present itself in “russet” hue; and even when it does, Shakespeare’s line is not the only way it can be truly spoken of. Shakespeare himself has used other images, equally appropriate and true; and many other metaphors in many other poets may come to mind. However apt, or apparently perfect, a metaphor may be, it is always conceivable that an even apter one, or at least another just as apt, could be found. So there may be a dozen very different, but equally true, portraits of the same person. And to say that Shaw’s *Joan* is true does not mean saying that another dramatist’s very different play on the same theme may not also be true. In other words, while we shall always need figures or pictures of some kind if we would express the concrete reality of something in our experience, we are not limited to any one figure or picture. Although the use of images is unavoidable, no particular image is indispensable. We are always aware of the distinction between the reality known in our experience and our ways of speaking about it, and we are thus in no danger of mistaking the figurative or allusive character of our speech.

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the myth to be exclusive or definitive. We have just been noting how there can be a quite indefinite proliferation of metaphors or similes in reference to the same object; there cannot be of myths. This limitation is partly owing to the fact that, whereas similes and metaphors, not to say works of art like plays or paintings, are the creations of individuals, myths are folk creations. The true myth is never consciously invented; it is a cultural inheritance. Indeed, a myth may have been so long and intimately associated with the distinctive life of a particular religious community that it is now a kind of indispensable symbol of its concrete reality, an actual carrier of its vitality and power. A new generation may reinterpret such a myth—indeed often it must—but it cannot conceivably substitute another myth for it.

Important as this consideration is, however, another peculiarity of the myth is even more important in this connection. This is its claim, not only to express and describe the felt reality, or quality, of an object, but also to account for it, to explain its origin. There may be many ways of truly describing a reality, but, one is likely to feel, there can hardly be many ways of truly explaining it.

When the modern poet speaks of the morn as “walking o'er the dew . . . ,” he is making use of a conscious metaphor and knows quite well that he might equally truly speak of the morn in other ways. But when the ancient poet, responding in the same imaginative way to the glory in the east, identifies the “russet” figure as Aurora rising from the sea and with rosy fingers dropping dew on the earth, we have a myth. For the ancient poet thinks of himself, not only as *describing* the morn, but also, and chiefly, as *explaining* its coming. The situation is not that the dawn is being thought

of as like the moving figure or as suggesting the moving figure; the dawn *is* the moving figure.

To be sure, we may easily exaggerate the realism or matter-of-fact-ness with which the ancient understood his myths. I think it is fair to assume that he did not take them as being literally true, in our sense of that phrase. But this would not usually have been because he thought of them as being *not* literally true, but rather because he was far less sharply aware than we of the distinction between the kinds of truth we have been discussing. What we call the literal and what we call the figurative or symbolical could flow together for him to an extent they cannot for us. What for us must have the character of a figure of speech could for him be also a more direct and factual account of reality. The pictures of Proteus and Triton which Wordsworth evokes in his familiar sonnet can have for us the kind of truth a good metaphor or simile can have. But for the ancient they had, in addition, another kind of truth: Proteus rose, in very fact, "from the sea," and "old Triton" really blew "his wreathèd horn." What is for us a suggestion or hint of the felt quality of an experienced reality could be for him a quite objective and definitive explanation of it as well. The stories of the gods were for him not only effective dramatic representations of real aspects of man's world; they also told him how the world under its various aspects came to be. In a word, images which for us are metaphor were for him myth.

The assertion that belief in the objective truth of the myth is essential to its being truly a myth—this assertion is not incompatible with the emphasis among contemporary anthropologists and historians of religion upon what is called its "archetypal and paradigmatic" character. This phrase is

taken from one of the most brilliant of these, Mircea Eliade, who argues eloquently, and with great learning, that for primitive man what was actual in time and place had reality only because it participated, through repetition or imitation, in certain original acts of gods or divine heroes. Thus each New Year was a fresh creation of the world, and the same primordial creative deed was seen as reenacted in such events as conception and birth and in ceremonial cleansings and renewals. Eliade's principal point is that archaic man in this way "annuls time"; he is able to live "in a continual present" and thus escape from the intolerable pressures of historical existence.⁵ To the latter point we shall need to return later, when we discuss, with special reference to the Hebrew-Christian tradition, the relation of myth to history. At the moment I am interested only in saying that this stress upon the "paradigmatic" nature of the god's actions as told in the myths, far from requiring a devaluation of their objective truth, rather enhances it. For according to this understanding, not only were the myths true; they alone were really true. The repetitive events which make up our actual experience have reality at all only because they share in the ultimate reality of the original events.

To be sure, these original events may have been thought of as taking place, not in *our* time, but in what Eliade calls "mythical time"; but, even so, they did take place, and only because they did can anything else real or authentic be said to exist. This objective truth of myth and its explanatory function are emphasized by Eliade when he writes:

⁵ *Cosmos and History*, tr. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959).

Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event which took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the "beginnings." In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality—an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of a "creation"; it relates how something was produced, began to *be*.⁶

Thus the mythological has a curious, almost paradoxical, double character. On the one hand, the myth is an imaginative and in a measure fanciful story; it must be such, for it is by definition an account of a divine action, and no human narrative of a divine action could conceivably be literally true. Whatever God "does," the words which designate or describe our own actions cannot in the same way designate or describe his. On the other hand, however, a myth is not a myth if the action of God which it describes in its own poetic fashion is not believed actually to have taken place. "Myth," writes Henri Frankfort, "is a form of poetry which transcends poetry in that it proclaims a truth."⁷ If I understand Paul Tillich correctly, his words are pertinent: "Only when one's thinking has objective reference can a truly mythical element pulsate through it."⁸ A myth is not an authentic myth if it is not believed.

If what I have been saying points, or comes anywhere

⁶ *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 5-6.

⁷ "Myth and Reality," in H. and H. A. Frankfort, *The Intellectual Character of Ancient Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), p. 8.

⁸ "The Religious Symbol," *Daedalus*, Summer, 1958, p. 21; see also p. 18-20.

near to pointing, to an important difference between the figurative in general and the mythological in particular, the question may be asked whether the mythological has any legitimate, or in the long run possible, place in the modern world. Must not all the ancient myths have for us the character of metaphor or something like it? We may preserve them as part of a cultural tradition, but can they be for us "myths" any longer? Are they not mere figures of speech, true only in the way certain works of art are true—that is, suggesting by the use of images true dimensions of man's existence and effectively expressing the quality of something in his experience, but without what we should ordinarily call objective truth, whether factual or metaphysical? We can value them; but we cannot believe them.

To take this position would obviously be to deny the continuing possibility of the mythological in any real sense of the term. But it would also be to deny the possibility of religion. It would mean the reduction of religion to aestheticism—or, if one objects to the term "reduction," the identification of the one with the other. Actually, however, not only are the two distinguishable, but religion is by far the deeper, and more creative, element in man's nature and in his response to the world. The Proteus and Triton of poetry are later than, derived from, and would be impossible without, the Proteus and Triton of religion. When Edna St. Vincent Millay in an ecstatic contemplation of a New England wood in autumn exclaimed,

Lord, I do fear
Thou'st made the world too beautiful this year,⁹

⁹ From *Collected Poems*, Harper & Row. Copyright 1913, 1940 by Edna St. Vincent Millay, by permission of Norma Millay Ellis.

she may have been expressing a merely temporary mood and making a purely aesthetic response to her immediate environment. But the words came to her only because an earlier generation were expressing what they knew to be the actual explanation of the glory of the world when they sang: "In his hands are all the corners of the earth; and the strength of the hills is his also. The sea is his and he made it and his hands prepared the dry land." And her words have vitality and power only because, in our own generation, we deeply "remember," if nothing more, that this is really true. The aesthetic power of the myth depends upon its continuing to have this kind of objective truth.

But how, we are asking, can this be? How can modern religious man both have myths (as he must to be religious) and at the same time know that it is myths he has (as he must if he is modern)? How can myths have reality as myths—that is, how can they have the kind of value a myth must have to be a myth—once we recognize them as myths? There is no doubt that they can have this reality and this value—the existence of vital religion in the modern world testifies as much—but how is this to be explained? How can this be? We must look further and more closely at what it means for a myth to be true. How does one believe a myth?

The clue to the answer lies, I believe, in the distinction between the two elements in the intention of myth which we have noted—namely, its intention to convey the quality of some reality in our experience and its intention to account for the origin of this reality as objective fact. I have said that in the ancient mythology the two intentions were not distinguished clearly, if at all. Aurora's "rosy fingers" served

both to suggest the mystery and beauty of the dawn and to designate the cause or source (or, if you will, the archetype) of it. For the modern religious person, however, the two elements must be clearly distinguished. One must recognize in any particular myth or story the presence of what I shall call for convenience the "existential-expressive" and the "objective-explanatory." Not that the two can be separated; if we accept the myth, we shall accept it as a whole. Still, we shall not be accepting each element in the same way. We shall accept the myth as "expressive" if it seems to us to convey in the only possible or adequate way the felt reality, the concrete meaning, of something in our existence; we shall accept it as "explanatory" if we find ourselves accounting for this "something" by the actual objective act of God of which the myth intends to speak. We do not find the myth true unless we find it true in both senses, although the meaning of the word "true" in the two cases will not be the same.

Perhaps so far as the Christian tradition is concerned, the distinction between the two elements can most clearly be seen in the area of eschatological mythology. We are bound to recognize the figurative, the highly imaginative, character of the language in which the Church has expressed its hopes for the ultimate future. The rich diversity of the images it has used—not to speak of their obvious incompatibility with one another if taken with any literalness—makes this character particularly clear. Moreover, it is manifest that, in this area especially, the only alternative to such imaginative speech is silence. Either we speak of our dead as "in Abraham's bosom," as "being with Christ," as "asleep in Christ" awaiting the "general resurrection" and the Lord's "return," or in some similar way; or else we refrain from speaking. But

this last we cannot do; our hopes are real and they clamor for expression. We *must* say that God will save us from death, that he will redeem our life from destruction, that by his mercy our partial, broken selves shall be made whole, that we shall see God. We actually expect this in our own future; we are convinced that it belongs to the future, or to the already realized present, of our dead. In other words, there is an objective or factual element in this mythology; and it would not be true mythology if this were not the case. To be sure, we cannot speak of what God will do for us "in the last day" without using language which belongs almost entirely to the imagination, but this does not mean that we are doubting the actuality of his doing it.

This is just as true of the opening story in the biblical mythology as of the final one. What does it mean to accept the biblical myth of the creation and fall of man? It means, first of all, I should say, accepting what is clearly seen to be an imaginative story as truly "expressive" of man's existential condition. Looked at so, the narrative in the first two chapters of Genesis is not an account of some actual happenings which, if we were well enough informed, might be given dates in time and located precisely in earthly or stellar space. Rather, it is a way of expressing what man is. If one sees man in Rousseauistic fashion as simply good or if one takes the opposite, the purely cynical, view, in neither case can this myth seem true. But if one sees man, oneself and mankind as a whole, as basically good and sound but, as it were, maimed or marred, then one will feel both the appeal and the essential truth of this ancient story. Human nature, it will seem to such a one, is a divine thing strangely twisted or distorted. Capable of, and in a measure actually knowing, a freedom

which nothing else in nature can know, man has fallen into a slavery more abject and degrading than anything the determinism of nature can produce.

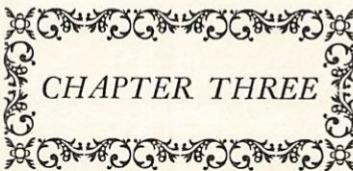
This existential understanding of man's actual nature has never been voiced more eloquently than by Paul: "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.... I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"¹⁰ However different our own psychological terminology might be, can we fail to understand what Paul is saying here? Do we not know the same conflict, the same inner contradiction in ourselves? And do we not see it written large in every form of our corporate existence? If so, we shall not reject the story that God crowned his creation of all things by making man in his own likeness and for companionship with himself, but only to see this son of his love, denying his creaturehood and rebelling against his Creator, fall into bondage to demonic powers of evil. This is not the only biblical story in which this understanding is expressed. One thinks, for example, of the images of the sheep lost from the fold where it belongs, and therefore utterly helpless and distraught, and of the son estranged and separated from his true home, and therefore wretched in his slavery and hunger.

The Genesis story, however, is not a parable, as these are; it is a myth. Accepting it, therefore, means more than seeing it as an apt metaphor or simile or as an instructive fable. One

¹⁰ Rom. 7: 19, 22-24. Biblical quotations, here and elsewhere in this book, are generally from the Revised Standard Version.

will see it, not only as truly "expressive" of our existential condition, but also as truly "explanatory" in a more objective sense. It does not say, "It is as though this happened"; it says, "This happened." To find it true means finding that it carries at its heart an objective or factual truth which can be expressed in no other way. One who accepts it will be affirming that back of or underneath—yes, and in some real sense prior to—the whole cosmic order and our own existence as men is God's reality; that God's goodness is the creative and constitutive principle in the actual world; and that evil, however its ultimate origins are to be explained and whether it is associated more closely with man's finitude or with his freedom, is essentially alien, involves man in a betrayal and denial of his true nature, and must finally be overcome.

This understanding, simply as abstract idea, might perhaps be stated in nonmythological terms, although I confess that I do not see clearly how this could be. What does seem clear to me, however, is that the concrete content of that understanding, the quality or "feel" of it, the particular way of realizing it which belongs to the historical life of Israel and later of the Church, cannot be otherwise designated or expressed. The story of man's creation and fall is as ancient as the cultural community itself and is the product of the same historical process. So long as we belong to that community and find the roots of our spiritual life in that tradition, so long shall we, not only remember this story, but also deeply believe it.



CHAPTER THREE

OUR NEED OF MYTHS

THUS far the word "myth" has been used without any attempt to define it, and I hope I shall be forgiven if I continue to avoid formal definition. The term has a variety of uses in a variety of connections and, as we have several times had occasion to observe, is notoriously difficult to define. Since our discussion does not presume to consider mythology in its whole range, but only in a single connection, a comprehensive definition is perhaps not required. It is important, however, that I make as clear as possible what I conceive to be the meaning of the word in connection with the biblical and credal materials we are considering, and I can hardly postpone longer some attempt at formulating in more concise and coherent fashion what has thus far emerged only in partial statements or by implication. I shall try to say, then, what (for the most part at any rate) I have meant

by the term and what I shall more consistently mean by it as this discussion proceeds.

Even this is by no means easy. Perhaps the following “notes” will suffice: (1) By “myth” I mean a story—that is, an imaginative narrative—dealing with a cosmically significant act of God (or of some superhuman being). By “cosmically significant act” is meant an act of decisive importance for the world, particularly the world of men, whose response to it may be an essential part of the story. This action may be represented as taking place in a prehistorical, a historical, or a posthistorical epoch; but it is a particular action at a particular time. (2) This narrative will have had its source in the common life of a human community, will bear the marks of its culture, and will persist over the generations as a part of its tradition. (3) The community will prize the story because it suggests, or answers to, and is believed actually to explain or account for, something distinctive and important in human existence, and particularly in its own. (4) Because of the relation in which the story thus stands to the actual existence of the community, it will have become itself an inseparable and indispensable part of the community’s life and, for those sharing that life, an irreplaceable symbol, an actual carrier of its power.

A myth, I should say, is truly a myth—and, to participants in the culture to which it belongs, will seem, by the same token, to be a *true* myth—when these four conditions apply.

All of these “notes” have been implied in what has already been said, although some of them are now stated in a way to anticipate our later discussion. Each one, it will be observed, has, in addition to its positive significance, a certain exclusive force. When we define the “myth” as a narrative, we

exclude anything merely descriptive or expository, no matter how allusive or figurative its language may be. (A descriptive or expository passage may make use of terms derived from, or reminiscent of, a myth and may therefore be in a certain sense "mythological"; but it is not a myth. A myth is a story.) When we specify as a myth's principal subject matter an "act of God"—and a "cosmically significant act" at that—we separate the myth from the innumerable legends or tales in every cultural tradition which are concerned primarily with human heroes and their deeds. To locate the origins of myth in the life of a religious community is to deny the possibility of conscious or intentional invention. Myths are social, not individual, creations. Finally, to limit the myth to what has become "irreplaceable symbol" of something distinctive and important in the community's existence is to reserve the term for a relatively small number of stories. Not every miracle story deserves to be called a "myth." Only the indispensable story is worthy of the name.

This last stipulation may seem particularly questionable. Is it not arbitrary thus to limit the term? Who is to separate out the indispensable stories in a community's traditions? Is it not likely that what will seem dispensable to one individual or group, or to one age or generation, will seem irreplaceable to another? These are good questions and some consideration must be given them.

At the outset we should recognize that a measure of what may be called "subjectivism" cannot be excluded from the very definition of myth. I have ventured to say that a myth is truly a myth only if it is believed. This means that a particular myth is not a myth *for me* if I do not find it true; and

if, not finding it true, I refer to it as a myth at all, it can be only because I know others do. We can speak of the myths of the ancient Greeks or Persians only because, although we do not believe them, we know they did. When it happens that a myth is no longer believed within some community or culture, it has ceased to be a myth. It may have had that character at an earlier time, but it has it no longer. It may still have value in suggesting or recalling the real quality of something in human experience, but, as we have seen, although this is enough to make a good metaphor, or a good work of art, it is not enough to make a good myth. It will be seen, then, that in making the questionable stipulation I am speaking from the point of view of a believer, who alone can have direct and immediate knowledge of the myth as myth. I am speaking as from within the community to which the myth belongs. I am saying that *from this point of view* a myth must be indispensable if it is to be believed—that is, if it is to be truly a myth at all.

This condition has always, I should say, applied in some measure, but it has become especially important and pertinent in the modern period. It will be recalled that in the preceding chapter I called attention to the fact that although figures of speech can have almost endless variety, even when the same object is being described, myths always tend to be exclusive. They presume to say, not what things are *like* (they might be like any number of things), but what they actually are and how they came to be. It is to be assumed, for example, that in Greece for some group at some time, to refer to Eos (Aurora) was the only adequate way of referring to the dawn, and that, in the same group or another, one could not speak definitively of the sun without speaking of

Helios. But with the rise of ancient science and philosophy and the progressive extension of their attitude and method, one after another of the ancient myths became dispensable. One might still find Aurora a useful image in referring to or describing the dawn; but eventually no one any longer needed Aurora to account for its coming. And because she was no longer indispensable to the designating and explicating of something in men's existence or in the existence of the world as they experienced it, she was no longer really credible. But if the myths were already under such pressure, even in the ancient world, what shall we say of their chances of survival in the modern period? In a word, the ancient religious myths have for a long time been on the defensive, and in the contemporary age only the absolutely indispensable myth can hope to survive. One can believe only the myths one has to believe.

This association of truth with necessity is not at all peculiar to myth. It is a universally valid principle in the intellectual life. We speak of truth as setting us free; but it does so, paradoxically enough, by making an absolute claim on us. There is something coercive about truth, wherever it is found and however it is expressed. One is no more free to accept truth than to reject it. One has no right to regard as true what one is not forced to regard as true. The only justification for agreeing to a logical or mathematical conclusion is that one finds one has to. Even in areas of our knowledge (as in history and geography) where absolutely certain truth is not attainable, but only reasonably probable truth—even here the principle still holds: one is justified in regarding as “probably true” only what one is required to regard as “probably true.” If our intellectual activity were always

carried on with complete integrity, we should never be able to believe what we were not inwardly constrained to believe.

William James in an influential essay of a generation ago celebrated what he called "the will to believe."¹ The argument was that where a matter of fact is uncertain and must in the nature of the case remain uncertain (that is, neither its truth nor its falseness can be demonstrated), but is at the same time of such a kind that the whole meaning of our existence is dependent on its being true—in such a case, one must, in effect, decide whether it is true or not. One cannot leave the question open; one must commit oneself one way or the other. And, it was concluded, since one must, in effect, either affirm or deny, one is justified in affirming. But is there not a *non sequitur* in the argument? It is true that I may have to commit myself *in action* when I am really uncertain of the vitally relevant facts—actually we find ourselves doing this constantly in decisions on matters great and small—but I see no way in which, by an act of will, I can change uncertainty to certainty or affirm as true what I am not inwardly required to acknowledge as true.

It should not seem strange, then, to say that only necessary myths can seem true, and this ought especially to be the case in a time like our own when the very possibility of a true myth has been brought under such constant and vigorous challenge. Whatever the situation in the past, an ancient religious myth must, in the modern world, seem clearly indispensable if it is to be credible and, therefore, if it is to continue to exist as a myth at all.

¹ *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York and London: Longmans Green and Company, 1897).

By "indispensable" I mean essential to our designating and expressing, and even to our grasping, or being grasped by, some reality in our own existence. The religious certainties to which true myths answer are, as we have often noted, existential certainties. They are not mere facts about the external world in time and space. They are not abstract or rational truths. They are neither deductions from premises nor inductions from data. They are not susceptible of being proved. But the reason they cannot be demonstrated is not that these realities are not sure enough, but rather that they are too sure. They cannot be proved for the same reason an axiom cannot be proved: no datum can be found as a *basis* of proof which is not less certain than the proposed *object* of proof. No premises can be as sure as the conclusion already is. God's reality cannot be established by any argument, but only because we already know it in the depths of our own existence. We know it whether we know that we know it or not. As we have been reminded before, we experience it as Emptiness or Nothingness if in no other way. We may know only an ultimate, unassuageable Hunger or Loneliness. But it is God we know in this Void—and indeed we must continue to know him so if we are to know him in any other way, as well. Religious experience is "deep calling unto deep"; and we cannot separate one "deep" from the other—the "deep" of our need of God and the "deep" of the God we need. God makes himself known as both Void and Fullness, as both Question and Answer, and does so in the depths of our own life.

In a word, the being of God and the relation in which he stands to us are not so-called objective facts to be established by arguments, nor are they mere hypotheses on the truth of

which we are to venture our lives. They are involved in our being as the men we are and, once recognized, can as little be doubted as we can doubt our own inner existence. Such existential realities cannot, except in the most superficial and partial way, be expressed in abstract conceptual terms. It is not only true that one cannot speak of them except with concrete images; one cannot grasp them otherwise oneself. The terms we have just been using—Void, Hunger, Loneliness, as well as such words as Judge, Companion, Father—belong inevitably to our way of speaking of God because they belong inseparably to our way of knowing him.

This general fact about the nature of what we are calling “existential realities” and about the kind of terms in which they must be expressed is not, however, a sufficient explanation of why some particular myth or story is essential and irreplaceable. We need to recognize a further fact, also “existential”; the existence in which these “realities” are found is not an individualistic thing. No man exists—in any sense of that word—apart from others. One’s own unique existence is really one’s own unique way of participating in certain corporate existences created in nature and history. Sometimes we distinguish between men as men and as members of various cultural groups. For most practical purposes in discussion this is unexceptionable; but actually the distinction is not as clear as it may seem. Is there such a thing as “men as men”? Must we not say that a purely human—in the sense of a merely or barely human, a generalized human—existence would be an abstraction and not an existence at all?

The Church has its own distinctive existence, and the Christian is such in virtue of his sharing in it. This existence had a historical beginning, and the Church’s essential nature

—its own unique inner being—was determined in the moment of its birth. But it is also true that in that same moment were created the dramatic forms for the expressing of this reality; and the forms, simply on that account, are inseparable from it. One could not abandon the ancient images and substitute modern images for them without losing contact with the concrete historical reality itself. When we say, then, that a Christian myth is indispensable, we are saying that something of decisive importance in the inner being and nature of the Church cannot be expressed or explained or even definitively referred to, except in terms of it. Such a myth is thus an irreplaceable symbol.²

I said earlier that not every miracle story deserves to be called a "myth," and the point I have just been trying to make may be clarified if we take an example. Consider the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead as recorded in the eleventh chapter of the Gospel of John. Jesus, having heard that his friend Lazarus was ill, arrives at his home only after he has been dead four days. Jesus finds Mary, Lazarus' sister, and many of her friends overwhelmed with grief and despair; but Martha, another sister, is sufficiently alert to the

² Paul Tillich is using the word "symbol" rather than "myth," but since I am now discussing myth (and for our purposes have defined it) as "irreplaceable symbol," his words apply: "The sign is interchangeable at will. It does not arise from necessity, for it has no inner power. The symbol, however, does possess a necessary character. It cannot be exchanged. It can only disappear when, through dissolution, it loses its inner power. Nor can it be merely constructed; it can only be created. Words and signs originally had a symbolic character. They conveyed the meaning which they expressed with an inherent power of their own. In the course of evolution and as a result of the transition from the mystical to the technical view of the world, they have lost their symbolic character, though not entirely. Once having lost their innate power they became

In one of the prayers of Milner-White we are led to ask that God shall give us "such trust" in truth that we shall "ask no rest from its demands and have no fear in its service."⁶ But the strange fact is that some of us find ourselves fearing truth because we love the very God to whom we address such a prayer, while others of us feel forced to deny God because we love the very truth he bids us trust. Some reject truth without knowing they are rejecting God. Others love truth without knowing it is God they love. On neither side is the passionate concern for truth recognized as the essentially religious thing it is. The Church must bear some part of the blame that this is so.

I have just said "some *part* of the blame"; for responsibility for the tragic conflict between science and faith does not rest on the Church alone. It would not do to identify the difference between the two as the difference between love of truth, on the one side, and distrust of truth, on the other. Actually, religion has been as devoted to truth as science—has always professed to be and, at its best, has always been. The trouble is that the "truth" which it has sought and prized has been a different "truth" from that which science has sought and prized; and neither religion nor science has fully come to terms with the "truth" of the other. Neither, in other words, has found a way fully to recognize the richness and manifoldness of truth.

As a matter of fact, in this respect science is likely to be more ignorant and naïve than religion. The fact that its

⁶ Eric Milner-White, *A Cambridge Bede Book* (New York: Longmans Green and Company, 1936).

"truth" is readily and neatly demonstrable and often has an immediate and obvious practical utility can easily betray science into a false complacency, which religion, at any rate in the modern world, is not likely to feel. The religious mind can hardly be as ignorant of, or as lacking in respect toward, what we call "scientific truth," as the scientific mind can so easily be as regards what may for convenience be called "religious truth." Actually, the scientific mind would be at least as much confounded and perplexed in accommodating itself fully to the truth revealed in religious experience (if it should see the need of trying to do this) as the religious mind is in accommodating itself to the truth disclosed in scientific research (as it cannot help seeing it must try to do). In a word, neither science nor religion sees truth in perfect focus; but because science looks with a single eye (that is, with one eye closed), it can more easily be deceived into thinking that it does.

This partial blindness of science is another way of referring to its inability to deal with the existential depths of man's life. Science is, by definition, concerned with the objective; it must observe its object from outside it. The great worth of science consists in its marvelous success in doing this, its amazing and ever-growing effectiveness in discovering, measuring, and thus to a degree controlling the objective world. Its temptation is to assume that all reality is objective, that one can stand outside everything that really exists and define and measure it. But actually, of course, this is not true. There is a whole world of reality that cannot be exhaustively investigated in this—or indeed in any other—way. One knows it from within it; and when one puts oneself outside it in order to look at it, it no longer stands by to

be looked at. It has vanished from our sight; it has refused to be reduced to the status of an object to be measured and controlled. But this does not mean that it is not really there. Existential reality is *reality*; and the truth about it is *truth*. The science which recognizes its own inability to understand and describe this truth is simply acknowledging the limitations of its own proper field. But the science which assumes that what it cannot understand and describe cannot be truth at all is self-deceived and falls as far short of being true science as the religious faith which pretends to a knowledge of objective facts of all kinds falls short of being true faith.

I have been speaking of "religion" and "science," sometimes as though they were discrete essences of some kind and sometimes as though the terms stood for two distinct classes of men. Needless to say, neither of these ways of speaking, or thinking, is true. Both terms designate aspects of the response to life and the world which all men make, as individuals and as cultural groups. Any conflict between "science" and "religion," between "reason" and "faith," is a conflict, not so much among us, as within us. We seem at times to be in danger of succumbing either to the superficiality, the false simplicity, of scientism or positivism, or to the obscurantism of a specious faith. The Christian not infrequently finds himself forced to come to terms with two "truths" which, according to all appearances, do not agree with each other. Where, he asks, is the unity, the inner coherence, of truth? How can the believer acknowledge fully the truth of reason, as he wants to do and indeed cannot help doing, without denying the truth revealed in the existence of the Church and in his own existence as a Christian, which, again, he

wants to affirm and indeed cannot help affirming? How can one hear what are sometimes called, not too exactly, the truth of the mind and the truth of the heart and find them both one?

It is a major thesis of these chapters that this can happen only as we recognize that each speaks a different language; and that though each language can be understood, neither can be exhaustively translated into the other. In particular, we shall be thinking about the importance of myth, not only in the communication of faith, but also in our original apprehension of its meaning and truth.